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Not Everyone Can Be a Frederick Douglass

Students love freedom. The freedom to do what he or she wants, the freedom to say what he or she wants, the freedom to do just about anything. Since I’m turning sixteen soon, I realize why a sixteenth birthday is such a big deal. I can finally get a license, meaning I have the freedom to go almost anywhere without being dependent on other people. So, as high school students love the feeling of doing what he or she wants when he or she wants, the thought of a virtual school where the student can choose what classes and even how long he or she works came as a very good surprise. The Florida Virtual School, known as FLVS, began its development in the fall of 1997 and since 2003, it has grown to instruct more than 97, 000 students with over 100 classes (Staker 80). I’ve taken two classes with FLVS, AP World History and Algebra II and this is how the online school works. The student simply has to register online and then request the courses. He or she can choose how long the course is, whether it be a summer long course or a normal year long, the same as public school. The student’s parents have to make an account to, and then the student’s guidance counselor must approve the course. But, before a student starts this process, there are motives he or she must consider. While it is tempting to enroll in an online course because of the ease and flexibility, a student should consider how curious he or she is about the subject and if he or she is willing to teach themselves.

Now, like any ten-year-old computer, FLVS has its benefits, like meeting the requirements for a game that is no longer made, but it also has its glitches. As Gary James lists, online courses have, “Extendibility, accessibility, and suitability, cross platform, ease of content update, and travel cost and time savings” (Advantages section). For those students who have a panic attack when an assignment isn’t graded in day, FLVS provided instant updates. Even though the teachers have work hours, they are still available for contact after hours, and if not, they usually respond within a day or so. What every student loves to hear is that an assignment can be submitted multiple times. Not only that, there are hardly any set due dates, and a student can work at his or her own pace. A student can also be idle in a class for up to two weeks before they get an angry e-mail from his or her teacher. FLVS can take the stress out of any class. But, as James also points out, nothing is perfect. There are many browser and bandwidth imitations and he asked the question, “Are computers replacing human contact?” (Disadvantages section). While taking my classes, what I experienced was that FLVS was more of doing homework than taking an actual class. For Algebra II, I would click on the assignment, read the examples, and then do the homework assignment. It gets difficult because although the teacher is available throughout the day, I could either e-mail him or e-mail him. And the line was always busy or he would take a day to respond to the e-mail. So not wanting to wait, I was sometimes left to teach myself how to do the problems. I knew it wasn’t a bad thing to learn how to accomplish the task by myself but in a subject like math I always found it useful to have someone to guide me and teach me shortcuts and other helpful tips. I repeated this cycle throughout the course while also forcing myself to muster up the motivation to type FLVS into the URL box instead of Tumblr or Facebook. I learned that FLVS was like a movie compared to its trailer. A trailer usually raises the expectations of a movie as the advantages of FLVS do. It is advertised that the teacher is available for about twelve hours every day, excluding Sunday. But in reality, a student still has to wait days for a response. A student is left to teach him or her self because unlike in public school, the student doesn’t see a teacher five times a week, so by the time the teacher and student stop playing phone tag, the student has resorted to Google to answer a question. So, a student should consider the underlying implications of the advantages of FLVS and the fact that first impressions aren’t always reliable.

Aside from the obvious considerations a student should take before enrolling in FLVS, his or her motivation should be taken into account. There are two types of motivations, extrinsic and intrinsic. Intrinsic motivation can be defined as, “The doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence. When intrinsically motivated a person is moved to act for the fun or challenge entailed rather than because of external prods, pressures, or rewards. When intrinsically motivated a person is moved to act for the fun or challenge entailed rather than because of external prods, pressures, or rewards” (Ryan and Deci 56). Almost the opposite of intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation can be defined as, “Extrinsic motivation is a construct that pertains whenever an activity is done in order to attain some separable outcome. Extrinsic motivation thus contrasts with intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing an activity simply for the enjoyment of the activity itself, rather than its instrumental value” (Ryan and Deci 60). The type of motivation would be intrinsic if a student studies Calculus simply because the individual wants to learn more about it and finds it interesting. Or, studying may be important to them. But as soon as the incentives become external, the motivation is extrinsic. Such as if the same student claimed that he studied Calculus because he wanted an A in the class or because his parents forced him to. Every child is required to go to school. Whether it is home school, public or private school, we, as students, are legally required to go. And it is safe to say that some students don’t want to go to school. So naturally, in high school, a lot of motivation comes extrinsically. Students study because they want a high GPA for college or at magnet high schools, like Suncoast High School, to stay in a program. There are also the parents who have a heart attack if their child doesn’t have at least a 3.8 GPA. For Suncoast, initially, motivation is intrinsic. An eighth grader applies to the school for the MSE program because he is interested in engineering and math. But in the years that follow, at least some of the work is done because of extrinsic motivation, just to pass. But, for virtual school, unless the student is homeschooled, he or she doesn’t have to take the class. Although some students enroll to boost their GPA and to put the class on their college applications, there are over 100 courses on FLVS. The individual still has a choice on the course and is going to pick one that is interesting, because no student is going to add an eighth class unless he or she enjoys it at least a little bit. So when enrolling in an online course, extrinsic motivation becomes intrinsic, and even if unknowingly, a student must consider how motivated he or she is when enrolling.

Intrinsic motivation is related to certain emotions, such as curiosity. Curiosity can be defined as, “A need, thirst or desire for knowledge. The concept of curiosity is central to motivation.” (Edelman). In a chart made by Bruce Perry, curiosity is found to result in exploration. Perry also gives the example of a five-year old and his discovery. “The 5-year-old finds tadpoles in a tiny pool of mud on the playground. This discovery gives him pleasure. When he experiences the joy of discovery, he will want to repeat his exploration of the pond. [Pleasure leads to repetition.] Each day, he and his classmates return. The tadpoles grow legs. [Repetition leads to mastery.] The children learn that tadpoles become frogs — a concrete example of a complex biological process. Mastery — in this case, understanding that tadpoles become frogs — leads to confidence. Confidence increases a willingness to act on curiosity — to explore, discover, and learn. "Can we bring tadpoles into the class? How do other baby animals grow up? Why don’t dog babies lose their tails?"” (The Cycle of Learning section). So, in this case, curiosity caused the boy to, even though unknowingly, learn about the world. As the boy gets older however, his curiosity is going to be his motivation for learning about other subjects or this one experience could even lead him to become a herpetologist. As shown by the boy, curiosity and interest are related. Curiosity grows into an interest. As Shawn M. Glynn, Lori Aultman, and Ashley Owens find, “The terms interest and curiosity are often used interchangeably in the motivation literature. Students in general education programs who are interested or curious about topics are oriented toward inquiry and discovery, both of which are instructionally desirable” (155-156). So if a student is curious about a subject, in turn, the individual is interested in it. And a student must consider how curious he or she is in a subject before enrolling in it through FLVS. This curiosity will give the student self-motivation to complete the course later on. Frederick Douglass is one example of a person who was self-motivated enough to teach himself to read. While in some aspects, Douglass was motivated extrinsically because he wanted to be freed from slavery; his curiosity is what led him to become as knowledgeable as he was about slavery. He claims, “While in this state of mind, I was eager to hear any one speak of slavery. I was a ready listener. Every little while, I could hear something about the abolitionists. It was some time before I found what the word meant. It was always used in such connections as to make it an interesting word to me” (46). He was so curious about the subject that he was willing to do the work to learn more about it. No one forced him to learn how to read or write, nothing but his self-desire for freedom and curiosity made him read about slavery. He found his own tools to learn to read and write and he did it for himself. So when a student is deciding to enroll in a class, he or she must ask, “How motivated am I about this course? Am I really curious about it? Is my only motivation to get a good grade and boost my GPA?” Because, and the problem is, Frederick Douglass was an exception. He was able to teach himself with no intentional help from anyone else. And not everyone can be as determined as Frederick Douglass was based merely on curiosity. Not everyone can find the motivation to learn as thoroughly as he did, especially if the individual has no real interest in the subject. As with the boy and the tadpole and now with Frederick Douglass, students cannot teach themselves unless they are curious enough to explore the subject. So again, a student should consider the motives behind his or her choice.

While a student does need curiosity in an online course, there are some factors that a student must take into account. There are other emotions that can constrain curiosity. Over time, curiosity can diminish because of fear and disapproval (Perry, Constrained Curiosity section). At Suncoast, a reason for taking online classes is to boost a student’s class rank. Student’s who have straight A’s can be in the 20’s or 30’s while students with worse grades, but more credits, are in the top 10. The fear of not getting into a dream college or the fear of disappointing others can cause students to forget their intrinsic motives and take on work that they aren’t motivated to do. Sometimes this leads to success, other times not. Students should take out all other factors and focus on what course of action is good for them.

Therefore, unless a student is homeschooled or required to take a class online, he or she should take a class that is interesting. If the class isn’t required, there’s no reason to take on an extra class that causes extra work and less time to explore subjects that actually are found interesting. And curiosity, as intrinsic motivation, is what compels people to explore a subject. With an online course, that motivation is needed to complete the work during weekends and the summer because, let’s face it, no one wants to do boring work on the little time that they have off from school. And although other factors seem to be more important than curiosity towards the online class, those factors are simply covering up a student’s intrinsic motivation. The final question students can ask themselves is, “Can I take on the feat that Frederick Douglass did when he decided to teach himself to read?”

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